

## Through Open Doors by CatsBalletHarveySpecter

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**Summary:** \*SPOILERS FOR SEASON 3\* Joyce is struggling to deal with life without Hopper. She and Eleven set out to find him in hopes he made it out of the lab alive.

# 1. Chapter 1

## Through Open Doors

"Joyce" Karen calls from the front porch of the Byers house, "Joyce please, let me in."

A puffy-eyed Joyce reluctantly opens the door for Karen before trudging back to the living room and flopping down on the couch. It had been two weeks since they shut the gate. Two weeks since she lost him. Two weeks since her world fell apart. She did her best to be strong for the kids, putting on a brave face as she made them dinner and asked about their day but she was torn up inside and she didn't know if she would ever be whole again.

It hit her harder on some days and today was one of those days. Eleven had moved in with them immediately and had been an equal mess when it came to handling the demise of her adopted father. She spent most days alone in her room, curled up in bed and Joyce often had to beg her to come to eat. It killed Joyce to see the young girl hurting, but it was hard to tell her everything would be alright when she herself was far from alright.

She thought she would be able to handle this after having already experienced losing a loved one with Bob, but she was quickly learning this was nothing like that. God, here she was referring to Hopper as a loved one when she'd blown him off for dinner. If she could do it all over, she would tell him how much he meant to her when she had the chance. She would tell him about all those feelings that terrified her because she'd never felt them towards anyone else, she'd never felt like she needed someone the way she needed him. Losing Hopper was the hardest thing she'd ever faced, and that was saying a lot considering she'd fought monsters from another dimension.

Karen had been coming around with meals for the Byers family since she heard the news, but she usually just dropped off her casserole dish and left Joyce to her thoughts. Today, however, she takes a seat across from Joyce on the couch. The kids were all at the movies, a distraction Joyce thought Eleven could use so she had the house to

herself for a few hours. Karen studies her friend as she picks at her nails, eyes swollen from the tears she shed, hair a tangled mess. Joyce Byers was the picture of broken and it shocked Karen to her core. She'd seen this woman go through hell and back, she dealt with a dead beat ex-husband, raised two boys all on her own and even lost her boyfriend last year. And yet, she'd never seen her look so defeated, so alone.

"I'm here, if you want to talk about it" Karen offers, reaching to pat Joyce's arm reassuringly.

Joyce looks up at Karen and sighs. She was too exhausted to talk about it but she was tired of keeping it all bottled up.

"It's just, it's not fair" she whispers, surprising Karen with the fact that she was finally ready to talk about it.

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*She looked beautiful, even when she was broken, to him she always looked astonishing.*

*He hated to see her like this, hurting. Both of them, broken.*

*He wanted to scream that he was right here, he didn't leave them but he knows it will be of no use, he would be screaming into an empty void.*

*Empty. He feels empty. He wishes he could tell her that she doesn't have to hurt like this. That he will find his way back to them even if it kills him.*

*He wants to reach out and comfort her. To take her in his arms and make everything alright.*

*He's standing right here but she can't see him.*

*He can't tell her how much she means to him. How much he loves her.*

*Sighing, he takes a seat on the empty end of the couch, watching as Karen Wheeler tries to comfort her.*

*This wasn't how things were supposed to end.*

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"We were finally... we were going to..." Joyce blubbers, wiping her tears on the back of her sleeve while Karen holds her other hand in support.

"You were going to what honey?"

"Everything was finally falling in to place... And I was finally ready..."

"Ready for what?"

"Ready to have everything with him" she cries, dropping her head into her hands. Trying to calm herself out of another panic attack she slows her breathing and closes her eyes. She pulls herself together as best she can and turns back to Karen.

"We were finally in a place where I think we were both ready, to be together" she clarifies and Karen stares back at her wide-eyed. She'd always assumed there was more going on between Joyce and the chief of police, but she didn't expect Joyce to be so upfront about it.

"We were supposed to go on a date. A date I should've said yes too along time ago..."

"Why didn't you? Say yes, I mean?"

"Because I was afraid" Joyce sighs with defeat, her tears having dried on her cheeks. She was too tired to cry anymore.

"I was afraid of what I felt for him. That I wasn't enough for him. But now, if I had the chance I would go back and say yes, every time. I would tell him how much having him my life means to me" she continues, "And I would tell him that despite my better instincts I was in love with him."

Karen just stares at Joyce, willing her to keep going with her rant, to get some of her feelings out in the open and Joyce obliges.

"God damn it Hopper! You weren't supposed to make me fall in love with you and then leave me!" she screams at no one in particular,

collapsing into Karen's arms with a heavy sob.

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*His heart is breaking for her.*

*He never wanted to leave her but he didn't have a choice.*

*Damn it he'd been in love with Joyce Byers since high school.*

*He takes one final look at her before leaving, making it his mission to get back to her and tell her he loved her back.*

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3 months after the gate is closed...

Moving was an easy decision after she lost the only reason she would ever stay in Hawkins. The kids were hesitant at first but soon the idea of starting over somewhere new began to sound promising. They packed up the moving van and after a series of heartfelt goodbyes and promises to visit, they were on their way to a new beginning.

Packing up his things was the second hardest thing she'd ever done; saying goodbye to him was the first. Placing the last of his shirts into a box, she stumbles upon a note in his handwriting. She closes her eyes when she realizes what it is, the heart-to-heart he gave his adopted daughter before everything turned upside down.

Eleven spots the paper and asks her what it is and when she realizes Hop never delivered his speech she gives the note to the young girl. She watches from the door as El reads her father's words, her heart aching for the young girl. El notices her in the doorway and asks if it's time to go and she says yes. Wrapping her arm around the young girl she leads her out of the room placing a kiss to into her hair.

"He loved you so much kiddo" she whispers.

Handing her the note Eleven looks up at her and smiles softly, "He loved you too."

Joyce wraps the girl in a hug and they stay there for a moment in silence, comforting each other the only way they know how.

Watching as the kids say goodbye, she glances over the note in her hands. Feelings. She too had forgotten what those were like. Yes, she loved Bob, but somehow her feelings for Hopper were different. They were all-consuming. She had watched him go from a jock she would share cigarettes with under the bleachers to a broken alcoholic to an incredible father and her feelings evolved as she watched him grow, watched him learn. She fell for him when they briefly dated back in high school. She fell a little more when he helped her save Will from the bounds of the Upside Down. And more when he smiled at her while passing her a cigarette on her dimly lit porch on a late Monday evening. She fell harder when she watched him with El, the way he was a father figure for her boys, the way he secretly had a huge heart. She fell more and more in love with Jim Hopper as he stopped coming up with excuses to come over and just came over. When he showed up at Melvalds just to have lunch with her. Slowly over time, she had fallen head over heels in love with everything about him.

She swears sometimes it feels like he's there with her, telling her it will all be alright. For a brief moment, she wanted to believe maybe she wasn't crazy, maybe somehow he really was. But she knew it was her paranoia talking and she couldn't let herself go down that rabbit hole again; not without Jim around to be the only one on her side.

Packing the kids up in the car, she takes one last look around her empty living room. They'd been to hell and back in this house, literally.

He needed to get out of here already. He had no idea how long it had been but her house was bare now and he was afraid once they left he would never be able to find them again.

She smiles as she takes one final glance around. So much had happened here. Her kids grew up here, Jonathan got his first video camera, Will learned how to ride a bike. The emotion was suddenly overwhelming, and she can feel herself beginning to panic. What if moving away wasn't a good idea? Her breath hitches in her throat as she struggles to calm herself until suddenly, she feels at ease. She feels safe and for the first time in months like maybe everything

would be alright. She doesn't know where the sudden calmness comes from, just that it feels like she's enveloped in a hug from him.

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*He knows she can't see him, but he can't help himself. He needed to hold her in his arms, one last time.*

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She freezes as he puts his arms around her and for a brief second, he's hopeful that maybe, she can sense him.

She swears she feels something different, something like an energy but she can't quite put her finger on it. It was eerily similar to what she felt when Will was trying to contact her from the Upside Down, but it couldn't be. Could it? They never found his body after the explosion, would it be so crazy that maybe he escaped through the gate before she closed it? Joyce, you're being crazy again, you're just telling yourself what you want to hear, she tries to reason with herself. But, what if? Eleven was still without her powers but what if there was some way they could look for him? There was no harm in looking, right?

Wrapping her sweater around herself she lets out a sigh. She would have to wait to bring it up until El's powers were back, otherwise, she knew the girl would go stir crazy waiting so they could investigate. For now, she was going to have to accept that he was gone. He would never know how she felt about him and it was time to start again. Before closing the door behind her she whispers to the empty room,

"Hop, if you can hear me somehow just know that I love you."

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*I can hear you, and I love you too. Always have, always will.*

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And she closes the door to her house one last time.

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Chicago, Christmas Time 1985

\*crackling static on the radio\*

The thunder rumbles as the dark clouds began to roll in over the city.

"Now remember, if it's too much for you sweetheart you can get out of there. You just got your powers back we don't want to push it" Joyce says to the blindfolding girl who is sitting in the middle of the living room floor.

"Got it. Don't push it" El responds back, tightening her blindfold around her head.

\*static crackling and lightning flashes in the distance\*

"She's been in there a long time maybe we should stop her?" Will whispers towards his mother.

\*Thunder booms throughout the house and the power fades in and out\*

Eleven gasps and jerks her blindfold off.

"I found him."



## 2. Chapter 2

### Through Open Doors- Ch 2

For those of you who asked, yes this is going to be a mutli-chapter story!

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*Hopper? Hopper!*

*Her words echoed through the tunnels and he could hear her getting closer.*

*Time stopped when she took his face in her hands.*

*He jumped up from the reoccurring nightmare he'd been having. A nightmare in which he almost his battle with the Upside Down. In which he almost lost her. A nightmare that was once again his reality.*

*God. He was so helplessly in love with her. He had been even back then.*

*But she was with Bob, and he was nothing if not a respectful man.*

*He did his best to move on that year, focus his energy on the kid. It was no use. She was a constant in his mind.*

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"I found him" Elevens eyes snap open as she rips off the blindfold and a crack of thunder roars through the house.

"Where?" Joyce whispers, hardly audible as she squeezes Will's hand, terrified El would confirm what she feared the most; that Hop was gone.

"Upside Down" El answers and Joyce releases the breath she'd been holding. He wasn't gone. There was still a chance and for the first time since they closed the gate, she allowed herself to be hopeful.

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*He can't remember how long it's been since he last saw them, his family, but he's been trying so hard to get back to them, to the people he loved.*

*He's wandering, lost and he's becoming weary and hopeless.*

*And then he senses her, El, she's somehow here, looking for him.*

*He screams as loud as his lungs allow him to, but no sound comes out.*

*He knows that she's found him.*

*He knows they'll come for him, his girls.*

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He was alive. Hopper was out there somewhere in the Upside Down and she didn't know how to feel. At first, she was elated to know he hadn't left her, not really. Then the panic set in; he'd been trapped in the Upside Down for months and she had no idea what state he was in or how they were going to rescue him. Even worse, she didn't know what would happen if that *thing* they trapped in there would find him.

But for the first time since leaving Hawkins she had hope. And for the first time since leaving she saw her kids excited about something. The move had been rough on them all, particularly El since she'd lost her powers and couldn't see Mike as much as she wished. Despite having earned her powers back, Joyce saw that Will and El were far from happy. They lived life moving through the motions, there was no happiness and there was no hope. Even Jonathan, who claimed to understand why she chose to move them out of Hawkins was struggling to adjust to life in a new city, and life without Nancy. But when El found Hopper in the void she saw something in them she hadn't seen since they left Hawkins; a spark she'd long since forgotten about.

So, when they asked how they were going to save Hopper she knew she couldn't cut them out of the process, and she knew exactly what they needed to do. They all piled into the back of her car and were on route to Hawkins within a few hours. They were going to get Hop back and nothing was going to stand in their way.

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*\*screeching noise\**

*He was going to die here. After everything they'd been through, he was never going to make it back to them.*

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Pulling into the Wheeler's driveway, El and Will barely wait until Joyce has stopped the car before they're sprinting towards the front door. Jonathan is quick to follow, while Joyce and Murray (who they picked up along the way) trailed behind.

"You really think it's him?" Murray whispers to her.

"I sure hope so" she replies before they reach the door and Karen welcomes them in.

"Joyce?" Karen calls from the porch.

"What a surprise, I didn't know you guys were coming! What brings you back to Hawkins?"

"Actually Karen, I need to talk to your kids..."

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"El!" Mike runs to hug her as soon as he spots her at the door, "What are you doing here?!"

"Who's at the door?" Dustin calls from behind Mike before spotting El and Will in the doorway.

"NO WAY! GUYS, WILL AND EL ARE BACK" he calls to the rest of the party who come running to greet their friends.

"I missed you" Mike whispers to El while everyone is busy greeting Will.

"I missed you too" she smiles and leans up on her toes to give him a small peck.

"Why are you guys making so much noise?" Nancy complains as she comes down the stairs and spots Jonathan walking up the driveway towards the house.

"Jonathan?!" she cries, running towards him and jumping into his arms, "What are you doing here?"

"Why don't we go inside, and my mom can explain" he suggests, leading her back towards the Wheeler's.

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"I'm sorry let me get this straight, Hopper didn't actually blow up but he's somewhere in the Upside Down?" Steve asks from his spot on the floor between Robin and Dustin.

"God Steve keep up, that's why we're all here so we can rescue Hopper" Dustin states matter-of-factly.

"Okay, does everyone know the plan?" Will asks and is met with a serious of head nods.

"Let's go save the chief."

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Phase one of the plan had been set into motion and now came the hard part, the waiting. While the kids were excited to have time to catch up with their friends, Joyce found herself parked out front of her old house. The new owners didn't appear to be home, so she turned off her car and sat in silence in the driveway. How did they get here? There was once a time she would have called Hawkins boring. In high school, Hopper would always tell her he couldn't wait to leave the city because nothing exciting ever happened here and she would laugh and agree before stealing his cigarette. If only teenage Hopper and Joyce could see them now, she's sure they would laugh at the irony of it all.

So much had changed in this town since then, but at the same time so many things remained the same. They were in their forties and they still couldn't manage to get their shit together and have some sort of relationship, much like the chaotic one they had in high school. For the better part of her marriage to Lonnie, Joyce often wondered if Jim was the one that got away. Now she was certain, and she was going to do everything in her power to not let him slip away this time; even if everything involved travelling to another dimension.

She glances towards the large window at the front of her former home, mind wandering back to the first week of summer.

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"Will, no more marshmallows you're going to spoil your appetite" she calls after he and Eleven sneak a few more from the bag on the counter.

"It won't spoil our appetite, we promise" he calls back speaking for both him and El as they run back outside to join their friends.

"You're fighting a losing battle there, trying to get El to stay out of the sweets" Hopper laughs as he reaches over Joyce's head and grabs a plate from the cabinet.

"They're the ones who insisted on the start of summer barbeque, I wouldn't want you to cook all the food for no reason" she jokes gesturing towards the mound of hot dogs he had stacked on the plate.

"With Henderson around, I don't think it'll be a problem" he groans as

a crash followed by a chorus of laughter echoes through the yard.

Peering through the window they watch as the kids pelt Steve with water guns, El opting to hold Mike's hand instead of playing along and Hopper rolls his eyes at his teenage daughters need to be so close to the Wheeler kid.

"Oh stop, it's cute" Joyce smiles, placing a hand on his forearm to help calm him.

"It's constant" he rolls his eyes as he pouts.

"We were teenagers once too Hop" she tilts her head with a smile.

"That's exactly why I'm worried" he smirks back at her, her hand still lingering on his forearm not going unnoticed as he takes a small step in her direction.

"We weren't that bad" she removes her hand and playfully swats at him with a small laugh.

He sends her a knowing look that causes her heart rate to increase, "Oh common. Do you remember that my dad caught us in the back seat of my car?"

She blushes at the memory. It seemed like a lifetime ago that they would fool around in the back seat of his car but there had been a time that they were young and in love.

"He was so mad" she muses at the memory.

"It was worth it..." he dares to say, studying her face as she processes what he's said, still standing close enough that he could reach out and grab her waist if he wanted to; but he resists. Her breath hitches in her throat and a small "Hop" escapes her lips, eyes studying his which display a mixture of adoration and lust.

"Mom, did you want me to get the grill started?" Jonathan asks as he strolls into the kitchen, walking in on what appears to be a moment between his mom and the chief.

"Oh sorry, I didn't mean to-"

The adults jut apart, despite nothing physically happening between them, they feel caught.

"It's alright, I'm on it" Hopper gestures to the plate of food and excuses himself as he heads to the grill out back.

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A single tear rolls down her cheek as the memory flashes through her mind. If only she'd know she'd be losing him a month later, she would've taken the risk and kissed him then and there. Thinking back on the events of that summer, she realizes there were several moments she would've changed had she known she may not see him again. She would've made sure she didn't miss that dinner, even if she was terrified of the magnitude her feelings for him. She would've told him to pull the car over when Murray made those not-so-ridiculous accusations. She would've kissed him when he got flustered after she asked him on a date down in that bunker. If she could just have another chance, she knew she would make every moment count.

Now, here she was, sitting in her car crying over missed moments in front of her former home in Hawkins, Indiana, a place she swore she would never come back to after losing him; only now there was hope. He was out there and as crazy as this plan was, it just might work. Yes, El had her powers back but their plan didn't involve using them more than once. She'd already lost one Hopper and she wasn't about to risk the life of another.

Wiping away the tears that had trickled down her cheek, she promised herself she would keep her emotions in check while they did this. She needed to be strong. For the kids, for herself and for him.

Backing out of the driveway she heads back to the Wheeler's to collect El and Murray. It was time to make one final trip to the lab. And this time, they were going to leave the gate open, 3 inches.

### 3. Chapter 3

This has suddenly grown into a much bigger story than I anticipated but I hope you're still enjoying it! This is something I would love to see happen in the fourth season (obviously in much more detail) but you get the idea.

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#### Chapter 3

Russia

\*indistinct Russian murmurs over a radio\*

"I thought you said they would come looking for him? We've let him live in Upside Down for months because you told us they would come!" A man mutters in Russian, holding a gun under the white haired mans chin.

"They will and when they do, she'll open the gate."

"If you're wrong about this, it's your head" the man barks, looking towards a fellow man in uniform, "take the American back to his cell!"

"They'll come looking, I know it!" he calls as two uniformed men drag him down the hall towards the cells.

"What makes you so sure?" A large man in a lab coat calls after him.

"I know the girl, she's loyal. I was her papa once" he calls back before being tossed on to his knees in his cell, the door slamming before he gets the chance to say anything else.

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Hawkins



She lost everything she cared about. She was a black hole. First Bob, and now Hop. Well, if she really thought about it, first it was Hopper back in high school, then Will to the Upside Down, then Bob to those monsters, then Hop once again.

Everything she cared about was destined to a disastrous fate. She was a black hole and she lost everything she cared about. Despite being a pillar of darkness, she needed Hopper back in her life. She was just getting used to being someone he loved.

*He was a fucking black hole. First Sarah, now his family. El, Joyce, the Byer's boys, they were out there in the world without him. He left them to grieve over him, he contributed to their brokenness. Darkness followed wherever he went and everything he loved was destined to be broken.*

*He didn't know how long he'd been here, in this place, but the darkness was starting to get to him. He tried to picture them living happy lives on the other side but some days it just wasn't enough. He was slipping away into the Upside Down, slowly losing his will to keep going.*

*Then he would remember that he had to keep fighting. For El, the little girl who single handily shown him what it meant to love again. She'd already dealt with so much loss at such a young age he couldn't bare be another thing she lost. He knew that Joyce had taken her in, and he couldn't be more grateful for Joyce being there for his girl when he couldn't be. She was always there when he it most and he knew now why he'd been in love with her for so long. Not only was she the most resilient needed woman he knew, but her strong will and huge heart were nearly magnetic. She made him want to be a better man and on days where he was ready to throw in the towel, all he had to do was think of her smile and his will to power through was reignited.*

*He'd taken up residence in the alternate dimension Byer's home. Though it was empty, he felt it somehow brought him closer to them. When he first found himself trapped in this place, he was thrilled when he wandered upon the familiar home because though they couldn't see him, he felt like he was there with him. He could sense them, and when he really focused, he could hear them. He could hear Joyce comforting El when she woke up screaming in the middle of the night, he could here Joyce weeping to*

*herself in the bathroom when she didn't think anyone was around.*

*He watched helplessly as his family mourned. He watched, broken-hearted, as they began to mend because he couldn't be there with them, he couldn't tell them how much he cared for them. Everyday he watched as they tried to move on, screaming into the void until his lungs gave out hoping they would hear him. He watched in pain as El struggled to adjust to life without powers. Pain because he could see how frustrated his adopted daughter was, but also because he knew without her powers, they would never find him.*

*Next to watching El cry over missing him, the hardest part was watching as Joyce put on her bravest face in front of the kids but letting her resolve crumble when she was alone. She looked broken and lost and all he wanted to do was comfort her.*

*He needed to make it out of here so he could finally take her on that date.*

*If he could do it all again, he would've kissed her when they had that moment during the start of summer barbecue. He would've been upfront and asked her on a real date that day in Melvald's. He would have told her how he felt about her; how his nerves came alive when her hand brushed against the back of his as she passed him a cigarette, how he loved that her hair always hung in front of her eyes and how she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever laid eyes on. If he could do it all over, he would tell her how all those women he brought home never meant a thing, how every time he brought a random woman home from the bar, he wished it was her. He would kiss her until her lips were numb, tell her he loved her and then kiss her some more. He would do anything in his power to make her smile. God, he loved her smile.*

*He needed to make it out of here so he could make her smile.*

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*Pulling into the Wheeler's driveway she pulls herself together with a series of deep breaths. Knocking on the basement door she tells El it's time to go and the girl nods and follows her to the car after a quick see you soon (not a goodbye) to all her friends.*

*"Are you sure you're ready for this sweetheart? Because if you don't*

feel strong enough e don't have to do this" Joyce asks her as she climbs into the front seat of the Pinto.

"I'm ready" Eleven states with a determined nod.

"Okay. Dr. Owens is going to meet us at the lab with Murray and all you need to do is re-open the gate, do you think you can do that?"

"I can do it" she mumbles, eyes focused on the road ahead of them.

"He would be so proud of you and all the progress you've made" Joyce smiles down at the girl next to her.

"I miss him" she sighs, still focused on the road in front of them.

"Me too sweetheart. I don't think the feeling of missing someone you love ever goes away" Joyce adds with a small sigh of her own.

"Would we be a family?"

"What do you mean?"

"If dad didn't disappear, would we be a family?" El looks up to Joyce wearing a hopeful expression and Joyce can't bear to lie to the girl.

"I don't know..."

"But you loved him, right?"

"Yes" Joyce squeezes her eyes shut as she answers.

"And he loved you too" she points out, Joyce's initial answer not adding up in her head.

"Then why wouldn't we be a family?"

"It's complicated, sweetheart. Sometimes it's easy to... to get confused... and not realize what is right in front of you face."

"In front of your face?" El repeats her words, trying to understand what she means.

"It's an expression. That can be your new word for today. It means

that I didn't know that Hopper..." she tries to come up with a way to word her sentence so El will understand, "loved me" she concludes.

"But now you know?" El asks.

"Now I know" she gives the girl a tight lipped smile and a pat on the arm.

"Maybe, when we find him, we can be a family? I know he would like that" El states rather confidently.

"And how do you know that?" Joyce playfully tickles the girl's side to help lighten the mood.

"Because when I found him, I could see what he was thinking and he was thinking that he missed us."

"That doesn't mean he wants us to be a family, don't you miss your friends when you're away from them?"

"This was different. At first, he was thinking about how he failed me, how he left me and you alone and that he missed us and wanted to come back to us. But me and Will looked for him another time," she blushes at the admission of re-entering the void and not telling Joyce.

"I don't know what it meant but he was thinking about um, En-zo's" she tries to pronounce the word but stutters mid-way through.

"And he was thinking about kissing you" she blushes as she tells Joyce what she witnessed.

Joyce's cheeks flush with red and all she manages to say is a quiet, "oh" before they arrive in the lab parking lot.

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*Everyday he was trapped in this place was a new challenge. That thing was in here with him and though it hadn't found him yet, he knew it was only a matter of time.*

*The Byers packed up and left Hawkins, indirectly leaving him behind.*

*He doesn't know how he's going to get out of here while the gate is closed but he knows there must be another way, so he begins to wonder; searching for something, anything that can help him escape.*

*Something tells him to start with the lab so that's where he finds himself, looking for a way to re-open the gate.*

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Dr. Owens and Murray are already waiting outside the foreclosed lab building, which stood dauntingly before them as they stepped out of Joyce's car. It was eerily quiet as they made their way through the darkened lab; flashlights guiding them towards where the former gate to the Upside Down once was. Even having been back inside once since the death of Bob, this place still haunts Joyce to her very core, but she does her best to put on a brave face for El. When they reach the part of the lab that had been sealed off after El closed the gate last year, she can't help but notice it looks different than it did when she and Hopper broke in just days before his apparent death. Her heart aches when she recalls his words that night. He wanted her to feel safe in Hawkins, he wanted to make it so that Hawkins could still feel like her home. Little did he know he was the only person who had ever made her feel safe and being with him was the closest she'd felt to being at home in years. She scopes out the area, trying to pin point what was different about it when Owen's speaks up, "We had them remove the concrete... so she can open the gate."

El peers through the windows into the void and recognizes the lift she and Hopper stood on a year prior when she fought this thing and used everything she had to seal the gate. Murray and Dr. Owens help her and Joyce onto the lift and they descend into the blackness. Joyce takes El's hand in her own and gives it a gentle squeeze. This all felt hauntingly familiar, the sites, the sounds, the protective look in Joyce's eye that she'd seen in Hopper's when they descended this very shaft the year prior. It was the same, but it was different. Unlike last time, when she was put in this place to close a gate allowing inter-dimensional monster's into their world, this time she was here to open it. Unlike last time, when Hopper had to keep those demodogs away from them as she worked, Joyce stood back as she raised her left hand towards the darkness before them. Last time she stood here with her adopted father and attempted to save the world. This

time, she stood with her Joyce in attempt to save her father.

She closes her eyes and a small drop of blood trickles down her face as the darkness before them begins to squeal and turn red, coming alive.

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"Sir, we're picking up a signal in Hawkins, it's them."

"Are you sure?"

\*blaring alarm\*

"Sir, the gate is opening" a woman calls to him from behind a computer screen.

"Pull up the lab footage! And someone fetch me the American!" he orders, turning towards the large screen in the lab that had security camera footage from the old Hawkins lab, showcasing a young girl and a brunette working to open the gate.

"Gotcha!"